

The History Division and the Chief Historians—An Overview

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It has been more than 56 years since Verne E. Chatelain reported for duty as a staff historian in the National Park Service's Washington Office. Chatelain, formerly head of the History and Social Sciences Department at Nebraska State Teachers College, had been hired by Director Horace M. Albright, a keen student of history, to develop a program aimed at interpreting and preserving sites and structures associated with the history of our country. Several months earlier, the Service had employed two park historians—Elbert Cox and B. Floyd Flickinger—who were assigned to Colonial National Monument. The two young historians entered on duty at an exciting but hectic time, because on October 19, 1931, the Nation would celebrate the sesquicentennial of the British surrender at Yorktown to American and French forces commanded by Gen. George Washington.

Chatelain found himself assigned to the Branch of Research and Education led by Harold C. Bryant, where he headed the newly constituted History Division. The division remained a small operation, consisting of Chatelain and a secretary, until the March 4, 1933, inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt as 32nd President and the advent of the New Deal. Much of Chatelain's time and energy during these early years was spent laying the groundwork for an effective program of interpreting the Service's historical resources to park visitors to complement the natural science and archeological programs that had been in place and had become a hallmark at the great western parks. Chatelain also played an important role in planning the campaign that resulted in the establishment by Congress of Morristown National Historic Park.

The next few years were exciting and productive for Chief Historian Chatelain and the History Division as the Service's commitment to historic interpretation and preservation skyrocketed. The Emergency Conservation Works (ECW) program gave birth to the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the number of units in the National Park System more than doubled on August 10, 1933, when an Executive order was implemented consolidating all national parks and national monuments, all military parks, 11 national cemeteries, all national memorials, and the parks of the National Capital under National Park Service administration.

In congressional hearings in the late 1920s, Director Albright had taken the stance that the Service, because of its experience in public education and resource management, could better interpret the military parks than the War Department. In staffing the new historical parks, the Service now had to insure that key employees possessed a background in history.

CCC camps were established in many Service areas, and to oversee preservation projects historians were hired and paid out of ECW funds. Many of the newly recruited historians, before being assigned to the field, worked directly for Chief Historian Chatelain on park-related research projects. Office space for these professionals was secured at the Library of Congress. Within less than six months, Chatelain had direct supervision over more historians than graced the departments of major universities. Most of these historians were soon assigned to the field or to field offices (the precursors of regional offices) that were established to oversee ECW projects focusing on state and municipal parks.

Through the efforts of many people—including Park Service Director Arno B. Cammerer and Chief Historian Chatelain—the Historic Sites Act was drafted, amended, and passed by Congress, and on August 21, 1935, signed by President Roosevelt. The Act established a "national policy to preserve for public use historic sites, buildings, and objects of national significance for the inspiration and benefit of the people of the United States." Among the missions it gave the Secretary of the Interior and the National Park

Service were to survey historic properties "for the purpose of determining which possess exceptional value as commemorating or illustrating the history of the United States."

The History Division, redesignated the Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings, was delegated the task of undertaking the National Survey which commenced in 1937, and was closed down in the weeks following the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor.

Chatelain, because of a rift with the strong-willed and mercurial Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, only served as acting assistant director of the Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings. When he left the Service in August 1936, he was succeeded as acting director by Branch Spaulding (a field administrator with a background in history). Spaulding was retained in an acting capacity until May 15, 1938, when he returned to the superintendency of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County Battlefields Memorial National Military Park. During the Spaulding months, in July 1937, four regional offices were established. When staffed, each regional office had a regional historian. Ronald F. Lee, who had entered the Service in 1933 at Shiloh National Military Park, succeeded Spaulding and was named supervisor of the Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings. Lee wore a "second hat" as the Service's chief historian.

Lee, like Chatelain, was a strong energetic personality and superior administrator who left his stamp on the Service and its history program. Unlike Chatelain, Lee was diplomatic and adept at working within the system. An August 1938 reorganization saw the unit headed by Chief Historian Lee redesignated the Branch of Historic Sites and divided into Historic Sites and Archeological Sites divisions. Three years later, an archeology division was added to the branch. The austerity and retrenchment of the World War II years found the headquarters of the National Park Service relocated from Washington, DC, to Chicago's Merchandise Mart. With Chief Historian Lee on active duty with the armed services, Herbert E. Kahler—like Lee a former University of Minnesota graduate student who had entered on duty as a park historian at Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park in 1933—headed a lean and mean reorganized Branch of History as its acting chief.

By February 1946 the Service was again headquartered in Washington, and Lee—back from the military—resumed the chief historian's position and headed the Branch of History, consisting of Archeological and Interpretive divisions. A March 31, 1951, reorganization of the Washington office found Lee elevated to one of the Service's three assistant directors. Reporting to Lee were four divisions, one being the History Division headed by Chief Historian Herbert Kahler.

Lee, during his years as chief historian and branch chief, saw preservation, construction, and interpretive programs first pared in the months following the September 1, 1939, German attack on Poland and terminated in the months immediately following Pearl Harbor. The post-World War II years, with the end of rationing and the introduction of the five-day work week, found the American public taking to the road in record numbers, and visits to parks, both cultural and natural, zooming. Park Service budgets and personnel ceilings did not increase to meet this challenge, because with a post-war boom in the economy there was little need or desire for an Emergency Conservation Works program. Lee's office and the regional and park historians had to do more with less.

Chief Historian Lee, a low-key but persuasive and perceptive leader adept at working with disparate and often competing groups, made use of these talents to mobilize a formidable preservation coalition from within and outside the Service that led to action by Congress in 1949 that resulted in chartering the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Henceforth, Service preservationists would have allies in heightening the public's consciousness of the need to preserve and protect what was significant in America's cultural past and providing alternatives to National Park Service administration of sites and structures.

In 1948, Lee was a leader in the small core of NPS employees, most of whom were historians, who organized the Eastern National Park & Monument Association (ENP&MA), a cooperating association chartered to provide quality interpretive products

and services to visitors at NPS areas and plow profits back into member Service areas to enrich interpretive and research programs. ENP&MA has grown from a small "mom and pop" operation into a multi-million dollar association that in 1988 numbered 121 agencies, grossed more than \$11,300,000, and provided the Service with more than \$1,000,000 to enable member parks to meet interpretive and research initiatives that are beyond available NPS resources. ENP&MA and its successes are a fitting legacy to Ronald F. Lee and his associates.

Herbert E. Kahler succeeded Lee as chief historian and head of the History Division on April 1, 1951, and held this position until December 31, 1964, longer than any other person. A 1954 reorganization found the History Division becoming a branch in the Interpretive Division headed by Lee. On January 1, 1959, Lee became the Region V director and Daniel B. Beard was promoted from superintendent of Everglades National Park to chief of the Division of Interpretation. A December 1961 reorganization resulted in the establishment of a History and Archeology Division as one of the seven divisions reporting to an Assistant Director for Conservation, Interpretation and Use.

Herb Kahler, a gregarious and frequent visitor to the field, went that extra mile to get to know and bolster the morale of park historians. The staff of the History Division, as it had since 1948, included three to four staff historians and a chief curator. Besides responding to inquiries from the Congress and to calls for studies and reports by the Directorate and the Department, the Division was responsible for developing and overseeing policy and guidelines as they applied to the Service's historical resources.

In 1951, Director Arthur E. Demaray initiated the Administrative History Program. All units in the System were to prepare and maintain an administrative history to provide an institutional memory for the parks, thereby insuring that the staffs were apprised of opportunities and challenges. Failure by the History Division to give firm guidance and to promptly prepare and distribute a model administrative history and the advent of MISSION 66, a 10-year rehabilitation and capital development program, first slowed and then stalled this initiative.

MISSION 66, as to be expected, monopolized the time and energy of the Branch of History from 1955 through Mr. Kahler's retirement. There were programming and budgeting calls for hundreds of projects followed by reviews and comments focusing on master plans, interpretive prospectuses, wayside exhibit plans, and historic structure reports needed to implement Director Conrad L. Wirth's bold initiative to bring park facilities, staffing, and resource preservation up to standard by 1966, the Service's 50th anniversary.

In 1957, the National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings was reactivated. It was headed by a historian reporting to Kahler and staffed by historians assigned to each of the five regional offices. The Survey became an important Service tool for recognizing and encouraging the preservation of nationally significant properties regardless of ownership through the National Historic Landmarks program. In 1960, Secretary of the Interior Fred A. Seaton underscored the importance of the survey and program when he found 92 historic sites and buildings eligible for landmark designation.

Robert M. Utley, Kahler's successor as chief historian, was a NPS veteran. He had "cut his teeth" as a 17-year-old seasonal historian at Custer Battlefield National Monument prior to seven years' service in Santa Fe, New Mexico, first as site survey historian and then as regional historian for the Southwest Region. Utley possessed impressive credentials as a historian of the Army in the West, whose many publications have been and continue to be acclaimed by scholars as well as the public. As chief historian, Utley was singularly successful in melding his talents as a respected, much-published historian and an effective and innovative bureaucrat.

Utley's leadership of the History Division coincided with the years of George B. Hartzog, Jr., as Director. This was an exciting and productive period. Hartzog, a dynamic, politically astute, and hard-driving leader, lashed out with a number of bold new initiatives aimed at expanding the National Park System and asserting the Service's leadership in the

preservation movement that led to and followed passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

Hartzog was also a tinkerer, sometimes shooting from the hip, and instituted a number of reorganizations that had major repercussions for Utley's History Division, field historians, and the program. The first of these was implemented in December 1965 and resulted in the establishment of a Division of Interpretation and Visitor Services that reported to the Assistant Director for Operations.

Utley's History Division was responsible to the Assistant Director, Resource Studies. The close relationship on the Washington, regional, and park levels that dated to 1931 and the beginning of the Service's history program was sundered. Next, in the winter and spring of 1966, all programmed history research was centralized in Chief Historian Utley's office. To accomplish this, a corps of base-funded senior historians was assigned to Utley's staff. The regional historian positions were deemed superfluous and phased out.

This Hartzog reorganization had short-term benefits but its long-term effects caused problems that historians and cultural resource interpreters are still seeking to bridge. Centralization of history research under the inspired leadership of Bob Utley and the forthright, hard-driving Chief of Park History Studies, Roy E. Appleman, was cost-effective, responsive, and productive. It also provided Utley with a reservoir of talent to draw on in exercising his responsibilities for seeing that the parks were managed to insure that the historic resources were preserved and protected. The decisions to centralize research in Washington, abolish the regional historian positions, and emphasize communication skills at the expense of subject expertise in the field had unfortunate and long-lasting consequences. Positions formerly designated as park historians were reclassified and redesignated as interpreters, park technicians, and chiefs of information, and frequently downgraded.

In April 1970, Utley's empire was dismantled when Director Hartzog implemented another reorganization that broke up the corps of base-funded research historians and reassigned most of them to one of then two Service Centers, where they were project-funded. Henceforth, the slimmed-down chief historian's office would focus on budgets, policy, legislative liaison, compliance, and the National Historic Landmarks program.

Coincident with the organization and staffing of a Branch of Park History Studies, the Site Survey was centralized and staffed in Washington, an editor employed, and an ambitious publications program inaugurated. Before it was phased out in 1979, 12 handsome, copiously illustrated volumes, organized by theme and featuring the work of the National Survey, were published.

On October 15, 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the National Historic Preservation Act. This legislation, which expanded the National Register, established the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and provided for review of federal actions affecting properties listed in the National Register, had far-reaching and immediate repercussions for Chief Historian Utley, the history program, and the Service. Utley, who had worked closely with Director Hartzog and Ronald F. Lee to insure that the bill as enacted continued to recognize the Department of the Interior as the lead federal agency in historic preservation, chaired the task force that in 1966-67 drafted the guidelines and standards to establish and institutionalize the National Register.

A July 1967 Hartzog reorganization, resulting from the recommendations of a three-man committee chaired by former Chief Historian Lee, led to establishment of an Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation headed by Dr. Ernest A. Connally, an articulate and urbane architectural historian well known in the academic and preservation communities. To underscore the interdisciplinary approach to historic preservation, three divisions—History, Archeology, and Historic Architecture—reported to Connally.

From April 1970 until September 1973 Chief Historian Utley and the History Division were responsible for the Historic Sites Survey, policy and standards, and advising the Director on matters pertaining to history. In 1970, a team of historians prepared the cultural

resource component of the *National Park System Plan*, published in 1972, a blueprint for a drastic expansion of the System. Hartzog was fired as Director in December of 1972.

A March 30, 1972, reorganization, the last one associated with George Hartzog, found Connally becoming Associate Director for Professional Services and Utley stepping up to chief of the Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation. The History Division, one of four divisions reporting to Utley, was headed by Dr. A. Russell Mortensen, who joined the History Division from the University of Utah in the autumn of 1970.

Mortensen was a personable and well-meaning academician with strong links to the Western History Association, but slight appreciation of the mission of the Service, its areas, and its history program. A mid-September 1973 reorganization that separated Connally's associate directorship into two groups of offices with oversight of cultural resource programs enabled the Service to make better use of Mortensen's talents. Mortensen was promoted and named Assistant Director for Archeology and Historic Preservation, overseeing four divisions concerned with administration of programs external to the National Park System. This reorganization saw the Sites Survey separated from the History Division and assigned to Mortensen's assistant directorship. This decision was justified on the premise that the survey and designation of National Historic Landmarks (NHLs) affected properties outside the System and as NHLs were entered into the National Register there must be close linkage with the National Register Division.

Bob Utley, because of his familiarity with the NPS and its areas, became Assistant Director, Park Historic Preservation. Reporting to Utley were three divisions—History, Archeology, and Historic Architecture—that were responsible for oversight of policy, guidelines, and standards as applied to cultural resource properties managed by the NPS. Dr. Harry W. Pfanz, a 17-year NPS veteran with a deserved reputation for hard work, candor, and conservatism, was made chief historian, a position he held until his December 30, 1980, retirement. These were trying years for the History Division, as well as the other Washington offices involved with management of the Service's cultural properties. On May 14, 1976, a reorganization consolidated the three divisions into a Cultural Resource Management Division. Utley, dismayed at the low profile given cultural resources by Director Gary Everhardt, left the Service to become Deputy Executive Director of the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation and was replaced by F. Ross Holland. Twenty-six months later, in July 1978, with President Jimmy Carter in the White House, there was a major departmental reorganization. The Bureau of Outdoor Recreation and the divisions belonging to Connally's associate directorship were reorganized by Secretary of the Interior Cecil D. Andrus into a new bureau—the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service. Coincidentally, the Cultural Resources Management Division was elevated to an assistant directorship and the History Branch again became a division.

Administrative actions and bureaucratic decisions over which Chief Historian Pfanz had little control made his years as chief historian a retrenchment period. How to best secure and expedite compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 was a major challenge. The History Division took the lead in working with Bob Utley of the Advisory Council in implementing programmatic memorandums of agreement with the Advisory Council and the State Historic Preservation Officers to facilitate and expedite cultural resource and planning compliance actions on broad categories of activities. An essential element of these programmatic actions was monitoring and review of action documents, and this compelled the Service to reestablish and staff regional historian positions in the ten regional offices.

In 1974 and 1977, the History Division had the lead in developing and revising Chapter V of the Management Policies focusing on cultural resources. The History Division, working closely with the Anthropology and Historic Architecture divisions, wrote and issued the first release of *NPS-28, Cultural Resources Management Guideline*.

Long before the January 1979 Harpers Ferry workshop, it had become apparent to senior Service historians and interpreters, knowledgeable park visitors, and congressional

staffers that the mid-1960s decision to downplay the role and contributions of the professional discipline specialists in favor of the communicators at parks was misguided. Prodded by Congress, senior cultural resource professionals, interpreters, and managers at the Harpers Ferry workshop recommended that the Service take steps to again emphasize the need for the interpretive staffs at the parks to be firmly grounded in their professions as well as be good communicators. This recommendation was endorsed by the directorate, and by the mid-1980s many cultural parks had on their staffs capable and articulate discipline specialists, many with publication and research credits in their vitas.

Another thrust emerging from the Harpers Ferry workshop to which Chief Historian Pfanz was deeply committed was taking action to combat and bring to the directorate's attention the incompatible uses in many cultural areas, particularly military parks, near large urban areas. This had also been called to the Service's attention by Congress.

Among the first initiatives undertaken by Secretary of the Interior James G. Watt in 1981 was to abolish the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service. Those divisions concerned with external cultural resources, headed by Associate Director Jerry L. Rogers, returned to the National Park Service. An element of this reorganization included the beefing up of the History Division through a reassignment to it of the designation and dedesignation functions of the National Historic Landmarks program. As acting chief historian for most of 1981, Benjamin Levy oversaw the reactivation of this old line program which had atrophied during the HCRS years.

On November 1, 1981, Edwin C. Bearss was named chief historian, and Ben Levy became his strong "right arm" as the office's senior historian with responsibilities for the NHL and compliance activities. The NHL program was particularly important, because the Reagan administration gave high priority to the identification and recognition of nationally significant sites and structures and their preservation by individuals and groups outside the Service. But, before it could be full speed ahead, the 1980 amendments to the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 made it necessary to prepare, secure the approval of, and publish in the *Federal Register* regulations governing the NHL program. This was accomplished in 1982.

Then, in February 1983, to insure a better use of resources and promote efficiency through recognition that a number of the external and internal cultural resource programs were interdependent, the associate directorates for National Register Programs and Cultural Resources Management (including the History, Anthropology, Historic Architecture, and Curatorial Services divisions) were merged. Jerry Rogers, a skilled administrator sensitive to the need for Park Service historians to work with the state historic preservation offices, the preservation community, academia, local governments, and other outside parties to meet the challenges of the 1980s, was named to head the new associate directorate. The post-1983 organization of those offices on the Washington level concerned with cultural resources represented a return to the situation as it existed before the 1973 reorganization.

Edwin C. Bearss

Ed Bearss, a Service veteran since 1955 and a noted Civil War author and battlefield guide, reinvigorated the History Division with his dynamic leadership style honed in the U.S. Marine Corps. Bearss won the support of Director Russell E. Dickenson (a fellow former Marine) for an expanded National Historic Landmarks program and a revived administrative history program—the latter entailing appointment of a bureau historian to the staff for the first time. Bearss's unpretentious, yet commanding, presence also endeared him and his division to Dickenson's successor, William Penn Mott, Jr., and Secretary of the Interior Donald Paul Hodel, who invited the chief historian to lecture him and his top staff on the history of the Interior Department and commissioned the division to complete a publication on that subject.

Bearss's reputation beyond the National Park Service has had additional repercussions, as when Secretary of the Army John O. Marsh and Army Chief of Staff

Gen. John A. Wickham enlisted him in 1985 to lead them and the Army's top generals on a terrain walk at Antietam National Battlefield—the first of several such exercises reviving one of the original purposes of the battlefield parks as training grounds for military leaders. His personal relationship with the Secretary of the Army would profit the Service on other occasions involving cooperation with the military.

As one who attained distinction in both interpretation and research during this Service career, Bearss believes strongly that historical park interpreters should be park historians in fact if not title—experts in their subject matter capable of research pertinent to it. His tenure has been marked by a significant return of employees with professional historical training to historical park interpretation. Although the chief historian and the History Division exercise no line supervision over the park historians, the professional leadership and example of the division are vital to the encouragement of professionalism in the parks. Of late, the parks have had maximum encouragement in this regard.

—Barry Mackintosh